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Statement submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), Canadian Federation of University Women, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), Make Mothers Matter — MMM, Soroptimist International, Women's World Summit Foundation, Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

Education is a precondition to the empowerment of rural women and girls

The classic definition of empowerment refers to the process by which those who have previously been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability. This description remains widely accepted. GWI believes that education is a precondition for empowerment and that rural women and girls must have access to quality sustained education to inform their life choices and positively impact the trajectories of their lives.

Additionally, GWI maintains that empowerment includes the knowledge of the full and indivisible complement of human rights particularly the right to freedom of choice that can help women and girls reach their full potential as contributing members of society and leaders in their chosen fields. Knowledge of their human rights will foster women's and girls' deeper belief in their self-worth that will empower them to move beyond any dominant and repressive structures that hinder their progress. GWI sees the education of rural women and girls through a plethora of lenses but considers access to agricultural training, financial literacy, numeracy and a secondary education as indispensable to their empowerment. It, therefore, calls on States' full commitment to implement all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which together respond to challenges in the achievement of gender equity and empowerment for rural women and girls. GWI acknowledges that disaggregated data as specified in SDGs is essential.

Agricultural training empowers rural women

Multiple studies clarify the value of rural women to the agricultural sector but lack of training, land rights, and financial services impede women's full participation in this sector and foster their economic dependence on men.

GWI affirms that agriculture training is critically important and that training must cover modern agricultural techniques tailored to meet local conditions and the sustainable use of natural resources with the aim of accelerating economic development in rural areas.

GWI underscores that governments' efforts to create favourable working and living conditions in agricultural areas such as building roads, providing electricity and access to markets are as important as training rural women in the processing and commercialization of their products. Governments must, in parallel, provide rural women with land, water, agricultural resources and seeds.

To reduce gender-biased access to agricultural resources and improve training GWI calls on governments to:

- Measure the value of policies intended to benefit rural women by using a representative sample.
- Develop agricultural cooperatives that include training and incentives to increase attendance.
- Undertake comprehensive gender-based analyses to identify opportunities for the advancement of rural women.
- Work in partnership with women's business groups, non-governmental organizations and local women's groups to upskill rural women.

- Offer free localized agricultural vocational programs that teach women to monetize their agricultural work.
- Establish community financial institutions for micro-lending.

Financial Education of Rural Women: A Step Towards Empowerment

Rural women's economic rights are too often disregarded furthering their marginalization and hindering empowerment. GWI strongly objects to this denial of economic rights and advocates for the improvement of access to financial education for rural women worldwide. We believe that training in money management will reduce the economic inequalities faced by rural women and lead to greater empowerment.

Financial education improves women's independence and socio-economic inclusion. Opportunities when presented remain inaccessible to a large percentage of rural women because of a lack of support services such as transportation and childcare. GWI stresses that training providers should supply financial training through non-traditional formats to include women who are illiterate.

We acknowledge that women's access to financial services has increased since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. Many governments report having initiated gender-sensitive plans to improve rural women's financial literacy but due to the costly nature of such programs, and lack of professional trainers delays in implementation persist. GWI stated in its CSW 59 Oral Statement that States must prioritize financial literacy in the education system. Being taught financial literacy, from an early age, by qualified teachers, is critical to successfully empowering women to take charge of their own economic independence and, therefore, must be included in school curricula.

Rural women play a significant role in the development and stability of rural areas, therefore GWI appeals to States to show stronger political will towards rural women's empowerment by:

- Providing relevant and unbiased educational and vocational advice to women.
- Revising policies to ensure rural women have equal access to education, financial services including crop insurance, agricultural resources, basic infrastructure services, transportation, housing, healthcare, food security, land rights, employment opportunities, child and elder care and labour-saving technologies.
- Adopting gender-responsive rural development strategies and budgets to ensure the mainstreaming of rural women.
- Reforming legislation to eliminate all discriminatory practices, including violence against women and girls.
- Hosting general awareness programs in rural areas to inform women about Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) that can help them connect with support groups and online advice that facilitates their work.
- Improving Internet access in rural areas.

Education is a Precondition to Empowerment: The Time is Now for Global, Multilateral Action.

Equal access to quality education continues to represent a major challenge to the 2030 Agenda. Around the world, 263 million children are not receiving an education (UNESCO), 130 million of whom are girls. In rural communities, the problem is especially critical where only 39 per cent of rural girls are known to attend

school compared to 45 per cent of rural boys. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, rural girls are twice as likely to be out of school than urban girls. Every study shows that education leads to better nutrition, improved health, decreased vulnerability to contracting preventable diseases, like HIV/AIDS, reductions in domestic violence, child and forced marriages and early pregnancies. Irrefutably, education empowers rural women and girls and without education, the combination of all of these threats diminishes their empowerment. For these reasons, GWI continues to remind States of their commitment to the 2030 Agenda and particularly to SDGs 4 and 5.

GWI believes that the most efficient way to overcome the challenges rural girls face when trying to gain an education is by increasing the number of female teachers in rural schools. Research shows that parents are unwilling to let their daughters be taught by male teachers so the presence of female teachers results in more girls accessing and completing their education. Female teachers provide protection against harassment from boys and male staff members, advocate for girls' need for sanitary facilities and are positive role models who demonstrate the positive connection between education and employment prospects. For this reason, GWI continues to work to increase the number of female teachers in rural schools through its Uganda-based project Teachers for Rural Futures, which aims to train 50 young women to become teachers.

Given that education is a precondition for empowerment, GWI makes the following recommendations to reduce the barriers to education faced by rural girls and women:

- Establish schools closer to rural communities to reduce the risk of harm to rural girls on their walks to school.
- Ensure sustainable and logistically convenient access to clean water to reduce the double burden of domestic labour. (Research reported by UN Women shows that reducing the distance to water by 30 to 15 minutes boosts girls' school attendance by 12 per cent).
- Invest in household management supports like child care and labour-saving technologies and solar cookers.
- Invest in sanitary facilities and provide poor rural girls with sanitary products.
- Repeal discriminatory inheritance laws.
- Increase the number of female teachers in rural schools.
- Ensure that schools develop and actively implement a school policy promoting empowerment and gender rights.

GWI is pleased to contribute to CSW62 and looks forward to partnering with governments, civil society, the public and private sectors to empower rural girls and women of all ages.